

Lawmakers line dancing for districts

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Amendments

alter Rapides, Shreveport House seats

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BATON ROUGE — After heated debate, the House on Monday removed a new minority district in Shreveport that had been added in committee and granted Rapides Parish lawmakers' request to realign their districts.

But the arrangement that Rep. Chris Roy, D-Alexandria, worked out with 51-49 House approval could be in jeopardy Tuesday as Rep. Frank Howard, R-Many, pushes an amendment that would undo the deal and alter other districts.

Howard's proposal will be first up when the House convenes at 10 a.m. to resume debate on HB1 by Speaker of the House Jim Tucker, R-Terrytown.

Newly elected Rep. Alan Seabaugh, R-Shreveport, urged the House to remove the new minority district from the bill. He said the black population in Shreveport has not increased since the 2000 Census, so the number of black districts should not increase.

He said creating a new minority district "defies logic" and that the Voting Rights Act "does not affect only minorities."

And, Seabaugh said to the majority Republican House, with the adjustments required to implement the new district, "I'm not going to live in the district I was elected to represent."

If the minority district remained and Seabaugh did decide to run, he and fellow Republican Rep. Richie Burford of Stonewall would have been in a district against each other.

The House voted 57-46 — not quite a straight partisan split — to return Tucker's bill to the way it was filed with 29 minority districts.

District 3 Rep. Barbara Norton of Shreveport joined white legislators in arguing to strip the new district. She said she was concerned that it weakened her district so much that she or any other minority couldn't get re-elected.

Democrats Bobby Badon of Carencro and Jim Fannin of Jonesboro and independent Joel Robideaux of Lafayette also voted with Republicans. Republican Brett Geymann of Lake Charles and independents Michael Jackson of Baton Rouge and Ernest Wooton of Belle Chasse voted with Democrats.

In an early morning Republican Caucus meeting, two top members of the Jindal administration urged Republicans to remove the district that Rep. Rick Gallot,

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D-Ruston, added in committee.

Rep. Jane Smith, R-Shreveport, who chairs the caucus, said she invited Gov. Bobby Jindal's chief of staff, Timmy Teepell, and his executive counsel, Stephen Waguespack, so they could voice the administration's position on the issue.

The administration's involvement was contrary to the governor's opening speech in which he urged lawmakers to take a bipartisan approach to redistricting and not let party politics interfere, as it has in Washington, D.C.

He said they should "come together as Louisianans first, not as Republicans or Democrats first." He also indicated he would stay out of legislative business but he earlier said he wanted two vertical Congressional districts in the northern section of the state.

The minority district issue split the Caddo delegation.

"The numbers are not there," Norton said. "It would dilute the minority strength in District 3 and voters would

not be able to elect a minority."

Proponents of keeping the district, including minority Reps. Roy Burrell and Patrick Williams of Shreveport, said decreasing the black population in Norton's district from 88.7 percent to 63.7 percent left plenty enough voting strength for a minority candidate to win.

"No one needs 88 percent or 89 percent to win in a district," said Rep. Patricia Smith, D-Baton Rouge, who chairs the Legislative Black Caucus.

Gallot argued that the U.S. Justice Department, which must review the state's plan to comply with the Voting Rights Act, is not going to like that the House had the opportunity to create a minority district and didn't do it.

In a surprise move earlier in the day, the House approved creating three legislative districts within Rapides Parish instead of splitting it among four representatives, as Tucker's bill originally did.

Rep. Chris Roy, D-Alexandria, offered the amendment so he and Reps. Herbert Dixon, D-Alexandria and Chris Hazel, R-Ball, could represent the entire parish.

HBI, as approved by committee, would have split the

parish among four representatives and shifted districts so that Roy was to run against Rep. James Armes, D-Leesville.

Under the amendment co-authored by Roy, Armes, Dixon, Hazel and Rep. Robert Johnson, D-Marksville, the Alexandria representatives keep roughly their present districts. But Rep. Rick Nowlin, R-Natchitoches, and Rep. Billy Chandler, R-Dry Prong, would run against each other.

Nowlin and Chandler argued against the amendment.

Roy recounted for the House how Tucker's plans initially had him running against Nowlin, then against Armes, then Dixon and, before the amendment, against Armes again. With his amendment, he's in a district by himself.

But as the House adjourned for the day, Rep. Frank Howard was proposing an amendment that would undo Roy's amendment and affect several other districts, including Seabaughs, which was restored when the Shreveport minority district was removed.

"Mr. Speaker, it's nice to be loved in this chamber," Roy

said.

"Can you feel the love?" Tucker asked from behind him.

"I can feel the love," Roy told the House.

The vote in favor was mostly Democratic, but several Republicans voted with the Cenla delegation.

Rep. Sam Little tried but failed to undo an amendment attached in committee that restored much of Rep. Kay Katz's district in north Monroe. The entire Ouachita delegation, sans Little, argued against it.

Tucker did not object to an amendment by Rep. Taylor Barras, D-New Iberia, that shifted one precinct in Loreauville from the new St. Martin-Iberia-Lafayette minority District 93 into his district. By doing so, the minority percentage increased in what was to be District 93.

The House approved an amendment to shift the district number 93 back to New Orleans if districts are renumbered. It was the first district where a black representative, Ernest "Dutch" Morial, was elected to the House.

The new Acadiana district will receive a different